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LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN CHILD NEGLECT

This investigation of 156 black and white low-income families from rural Georgia contrasted neglectful with control families. The isolation and loneliness of neglectful mothers was confirmed, although their neighborhoods were no less supportive than those of non-neglectful mothers.

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THREE APPROACHES have been taken in attempting to expose the causes of child neglect: the economic, the personalistic, and the ecological.[1] According to its sociologically oriented proponents, the economic approach highlights the shortages and deprivations which the very poor necessarily share with their children.[2] Moreover, "Poverty exposes parents to the increased likelihood of additional stresses that may have deleterious effects upon their capacities to care adequately for their children."[3]

To the student of personality, parents' neglect of children is a significant reflection of more general deficits in their character structures. Investigators have identified a series of traits and a pervasive life style that justify terming them "damaged parents".[4] The syndrome commonly noted

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1. Norman A. Polansky et al., Damaged Parents (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

2. Isabel Wolock and Bernard Horowitz, "Child Maltreatment and Material Deprivation among AFDC-Recipient Families," Social Service Review 53 (June 1979): 175-94.

3. Jeanne M. Giovannoni and Andrew Billingsley, "Child Neglect among the Poor: A study of Parental Adequacy in Families of Three Ethnic Groups," Child Welfare 49 (April 1970): 204.

4. Polansky et al., Damaged Parents.

implicates gross immaturity based on developmental failures because of deprivation early in their own lives.[5]

The ecological approach, which is social psychological, asserts the impact on family functioning of the human environment in which it is embedded. "Socially impoverished families may be particularly vulnerable to socially impoverished environments and susceptible to amelioration only in socially rich environments."[6] In explaining neglect, the ecologist may implicate the neighborhood as nonsupportive, in other words, lacking warmth and inclusive helping networks. The notion that the low level of care found in some families is permitted - even encouraged - by the mores of a surrounding reference group would be an extension of the ecological approach.

Previous work by the senior author focused primarily on the nature, etiology, and possible treatment of ego-deficits in the parents of neglect. Yet his colleagues and he were impressed by the proportion of mothers, in particular, who seemed very lonely people. To be alone, or isolated, and to feel lonely are not the same, although aloneness may well lead to loneliness. In any event, many of the mothers of neglect both felt lonely and seemed objectively isolated.

The authors say "seemed" because their impressions were gained from data that were fragmentary, incidental to the main focus of the research. Hence, it was decided to conduct a study of the ecology of neglectful families in which data would be collected to test specifically a number of hypotheses concerning support or lack of it in their environments.

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5. Leontine Young, Wednesday's Children: A Study of Child Neglect and Abuse" (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Elizabeth G. Meier, "Child Neglect," in Social Work and Social Problems, ed. Nathan E. Cohen (New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1964), pp. 153-200; Mary Sullivan, Marion Spasser, and G. Lewis Penner, Bowen Center Project for Abused and Neglected Children (Washington, DC: Public Services Administration, 1977).

6. James M. Garbarino and Deborah Sherman, "High-Risk Neighborhoods and High-Risk Families: The Human Ecology of Child Maltreatment" (Boys' Town Nebraska: Center for the Study of Yough Development, photocopied, 1978), p.3.

Isolated Families

Five studies of parental aloneness have mentioned it in connection with abuse and cited it in cases of failure to thrive.[7] There have been fewer studies of child neglect. However, Isabel Wolock and Bernard Horowitz surveyed 380 maltreating mothers on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), among whom neglect was the predominating problem.[8] The women were socially isolated, having fewer formal or informal ties than a comparable sample of controls. Besides confirming the relative isolation of the neglectful parent from social contacts, Norman Polansky, et al. also measured involvement in helping networks.[9] Based on reports of help given and received, a family support index was constructed. Of the controls, 78.5 percent were at or beyond the highest point on the index; of the neglectful families, only 15 percent were.

In addition to those indications of aloneness, both neglectful mothers and fathers scored significantly higher on alienation on Leo Srole's anomia scale. They were more likely to have been placed outside the home as children; the mothers reported having felt less wanted as children.[10] From these and anecdotal data it was inferred that neglectful parents are severely lonely. But this factor was not measured directly. The authors' current research was planned to extend the previous explorations and to test the hypotheses that, as compared with non-neglectful parents in comparable life circumstances-

1. Neglectful mothers experience and will express more feelings of loneliness.

2. Parents in neglectful families are more isolated from helping networks.

3. Parents in such families are more socially isolated in general.

4. Children in neglectful families are also more socially isolated.

5. Neglectful families live in less supportive environments.

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7. Elizabeth Elmer, Children in Jeopardy (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967); Selwyn M. Smith, Ruth Hanson, and Sheila Noble, "Social Aspects of the Battered Baby Syndrome," British Journal of Psychiatry 125 (December 1974): 568-82; Sue L. Evans, John B. Reinhart, and Ruth A. Succop, "Failure to Thrive - A Study of 45 Children and their Families," Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry 2 (July 1972): 440-57; and Harold P. Martin, The Abused Child (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger 1976).

8. Wolock and Horowitz, "Child Maltreatment."

9. Polansky, Damaged Parents

10. Leo Srole, "Social Integration and Certain Corollaries: An Exploratory Study," American Sociological Review 21 (December 1956); 709-16.

6. The exclusion of neglectful parents from helping networks is due, in part, to their being assessed as unlikely to reciprocate help.

Study Design

In accordance with these hypotheses, the sampling design required recruiting families identified as neglectful in order to compare them with others in similar life circumstances who were not considered or known to be neglectful. The study was done in Georgia, which has a very large black minority. Because of the possibility of subcultural differences relevant to the hypotheses, the study sought to include equal numbers of black and white families to see if the hypotheses were true in both groups. Because the researchers thought the phenomena at interest would be easier to observe in their settings, they began with rural families. The definition of rural conformed to that of the census; that is, these families were living on farm plots or in sparsely settled communities (under 2500 population).

All neglect families, and a majority of the controls, were recruited through the Georgia Department of Family and Children's Services. Cases chosen were to have at least one child in the home between the ages of six and eleven years and the mother (or a mother-figure) present in the home and willing to cooperate in the study. To improve representativeness, each family was offered the inducement of $25.00 for participation. In order to get some independent information about the family's environment, interviews were also sought with the family's nearest neighbor, preferably the "woman of the house." The neighbor was paid $10.00. Hence, in each case, there was an interview with the mother; the father or father-person, if present; the focal child; and the neighbor. There were thirty-six white and forty black neglect cases and forty white and forty black control cases.

Instruments

To describe the methods of data collection, this article begins with an overview of the areas in which information was sought. Specific questions, scales, and other elements will be reserved until the presentation of results, where each becomes directly relevant.

The interview with the parent was longest and included-

1. Demographic data on household composition and socioeconomic status;

2. Mobility, geographic accessibility of relatives and other factors possibly bearing on availability of social contacts and helping networks;

3. Attitudes expressed about the supportiveness of the immediate setting as a place to rear children;

4. Direct measurement of loneliness feelings;

5. Degree of embeddedness in helping networks and social contacts.

The interview with the child was brief, naturally, and had largely to do with his or her own view of the neighborhood and of the availability of opportunities to socialize. The interview with the neighbor, which might have taken thirty to forty minutes, provided data on:

1. The socioeconomic status of the neighborhood;

2. Independent judgment of the supportiveness of the setting for families rearing children;

3. The position of the study family in the neighborhood, insofar as this could be obtained unobtrusively;

4. Attitude toward families maintaining low standards of child caring.

The families recruited for the study were from state agency districts in Southwest, Central, and Northeast Georgia. A very large portion of the neglect families were female-headed households, most of whom received AFDC, and so similar families were recruited as controls. Because their data is so much more complete than other data, and in the interests of brevity, this report of the results is confined to the mothers.

Comparability of the Samples

This study followed the logic usual in an ex post facto experiment. The search was from a known difference in effect (child neglect) to an unknown connection to cause (isolation, loneliness). In carrying out such a design, it is generally assumed that comparison groups should be matched as closely as possible on all other variables. But is that assumption casually drawn? How closely ought the samples match if the intent is to contrast typical neglectful households with non-neglectful families in general?

It seemed inappropriate to compare neglect families, who are so typically low-income, with families who were well-off or even average in income. The sharp economic discrepancy, itself, might account for many other differences observed, overwhelming other dynamics that might be discovered. On the other hand, if the neglectful really are the "poorest of the poor," as they have been described,[11] might the study be throwing the baby out with the bath if it matched the control sample to them too exactly? Take another example. Neglectful families typically contain more children than other families of similar background. What would it do to representativeness if one held family size constant? There are no simple answers to these dilemmas.

For theoretical reasons, then, as well as the practical difficulties of this kind of study, the researchers opted for a match that would be reasonably close but not slavishly precise. They began with families who were referred to them for the neglect sample and who agreed to be in the study. Only after

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11. Wolock and Horowitz, "Child Maltreatment."

about half of these families were in hand did the researchers commence the recruitment of controls, since there are many more of those to choose from. In each racial group, white and black, control families were selected to achieve a reasonably good match with the neglect families on income level and on presence-absence of a father-figure in the home. Other variables were not deliberately controlled, but information was obtained in order to assess the degree of fit on them, too.

According to the respondents, this was a population of families at or below the poverty line. Thus, 93.5 percent had family incomes below $10,000 per year; 64.5 percent were below $5,000, which is very low, considering the numbers of children involved. On the basis of the eduction and occupation of the head of household, August B. Hollingshead's Index of Social Position was computed.[12] The majority in each subsample fell into Class V, his lowest socioeconomic category. Table 1 lays out the degree of match obtained on a number of key variables. While there were some differences associated with race - which are not of interest here - the only variable on which the neglect sample differed significantly from the control was father absence-presence.

Average family sizes were in line with previous research. Mean number of children in neglect families was 4.16, in control, 3.11 ($p<.001$ by ANOVA). Median age of the mother was 31 years, and was the same in both groups. Despite their current similarities in socioeconomic status, it is indicative that a far higher proportion of persons in the control sample than in the neglect one had graduated from high school (43.0 percent versus 13.3 percent). This too was reminiscent of previous funding.[13] So the neglect and control families were in fact rather well-matched socioeconomically. They also differed in ways that were expectable if the neglect sample was representative of those seen in other surveys.

Potential for Network Membership

Beyond the socioeconomic, other demographic factors seemed worth recording for the light they might throw on the mother's opportunity to enter networks. Major moves of residence, for example, disrupt fragile connections based in neighborliness.[14]

In Table 2 are compiled several factors bearing on mobility. They indicate that, in terms of residing in the county of birth and length of time in the present community, the neglect women were hardly at a disavantage. Somewhat more of them had frequent changes in the locality where they lived. The only significant differences in mobility found in this research were

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12. August B. Hollingshead, "Two-Factor Index of Social Position" (New Haven, Conn.: mimeographed, 1957).

13. Polansky et al., Damaged Parents.

14. Paul Ammons, Josie Nelson, and John Wodarski, "Surviving Corporate Moves: Sources of Stress and Adaptation Among Corporate Executive Families," Family Relations 31 (April 1982). 207-12.

ethnic. The black sample was much the more stable geographically. Similarly, as Table 2 bears out, neglect mothers were living within visiting distance of relatives to the same extent as the controls were. If they proved more isolated, then the reasons must lie within more subtle processes.

Loneliness of Neglectful Mothers

Previous research strongly suggested that neglectful mothers tend to be very lonely people.[15] But in those studies the impression was an inference, for the feeling was not directly probed. The researchers' attempt to measure it directly, in this study, caused them misgivings. For example, immature people are prone to denial and loneliness is an affect very apt to be denied.[16] Nevertheless, the researchers decided to try to measure it.

The best available composite scale of the affect appeared to be the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale developed by Daniel Russell, Leititia A. Peplau, and Carolyn E. Cutrona.[17] The respondent is presented with a statement such as, "I feel in touch with the people around me"; or "I lack companionship." Each statement is then rated according to how frequently the person feels that way - never, rarely, sometimes, often. With help from Russell the researchers shortened the scale from its usual twenty items to the ten that seemed best for their purposes and probably most understandable to a noncollegiate test population. Scores then might range from a low of 10 to a high of 40, the later representing strong loneliness.

The mean score on the scale for neglect mothers was 21.0; for the control, 19.0 ($p=.013$ by ANOVA). Thus, despite measurement problems, the neglect mothers reported significantly greater feelings of loneliness. Following a suggestion by Phillip Shaver, the researchers also made use of the direct question, "How often do you feel lonesome now?" The respondent selected from alternatives ranging from "nearly all the time" to "hardly ever." Using a median test, the researchers found that 70 percent of the control mothers said they "seldom" or "hardly ever" felt lonesome; this was true of 48.8 percent of the neglect (chi-square = 6.6867, $p<.01$). Again, the hypothesis was supported. Indeed, the composite and single item scales correlated - .47. Hence, what was previously an interference about an intervening link in the chain of causes of neglect was now confirmed empirically.

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15. Polansky et al., Damaged Parents.

16. Florence Applebaum, "Loneliness: A Taxonomy and Psychodynamic View," Clinical Social Work Journal 6 (Spring 1978): 13-20; Norman A. Polansky, "On Loneliness: A Program for Social Work," Smith College Studies in Social Work 49 (April 1980): 85-113.

17. Daniel Russell, Leititia A. Peplau, and Carolyn E. Cutrona, "The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: Concurrent and Discriminant Validity Evidence," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 39 (September 1980): 472-80.

TABLE 1

Comparability of Neglect and Control Mothers in Life Circumstances

Variable	Percentages					
	White		Black		Total	
	Neg	Con	Neg	Con	Neg	Con
Father Absent	61	45	75	60	68	53a
Income under $5,000	64	53	78	64	71	58b
Receiving AFDC	49	43	83	63	67	53c
In Hollingshead Class V	89	78	95	88	92	83

a. Neg/Con $\chi^2 = 4.1252$ $p < .05$
b. Neg/Con $\chi^2 = 2.7829$ $p < .10$ n.s.
c. Neg/Con $\chi^2 = 3.2203$ $p < .10$ n.s.

Isolation

If these mothers are more lonesome than other low-income rural women living at least superficially similar lives, why are they? Loneliness that is chronic may have its roots in the marks left by early deprivations, but current loses, rejections, and isolation may also play a part.[18] In earlier studies the researchers had encountered some evidence of isolation. The present study, with its ecological emphasis, made a much more detailed investigation of these issues.

Helping Networks

When the authors speak of support or its lack in a person's environment, they have in mind most acutely whether help is available if it is needed. The study's method for assessing a mother's reports of the availability of help was adapted from earlier work by James Gaudin.[19] The use of a series of concrete items makes it possible to distinguish between instrumental (or concrete) and affective support. Questioning took the form, "Do you have anyone you could call on to: babysit with your children for about three hours for free?" Respondents could choose among: None; Yes, one or two; and Yes, three or more.

18. Polansky, "On Loneliness".

19. James M. Gaudin, Jr., "Mothers' Perceived Strength of Primary Group Networks and Maternal Child Abuse," D.S.W. diss., Florida State University School of Social Work, 1979.

TABLE 2

Opportunities for Network Membership

	Percentages	
	Neglect	Control
Residing in county of birth	53.9	41.3
Lived in this community at least three years	57.9	60.0
Moved twice or more in past five years	60.5	46.3
At least one relative within two miles	59.2	53.2
Six or more relatives within thirty miles	50.0	40.5

Few respondents reported having no one to call on for help. The major differences between neglect and controls in the study appeared when the researchers compared the proportions in each group who said they could call on three or more people. Thus Table 3 shows that, whereas 22.4 percent of the neglect women believed they had three or more people who would lend them $5.00, 55 percent of the controls thought so.

The groups varied markedly from each other on six of the forms of helping listed. Indeed, the only service in which there was not a significant difference was in the proportion saying they had three or more persons to call on for free babysitting. Two of the items - having someone to comfort you when you are low and someone who will listen with sympathy to your concerns and problems - were considered affective support; the others fall in the realm labelled instrumental support. Based on responses to individual items, the researchers constructed composite indices of each.

Analyses of variance were conducted on each of these indices testing effects for the neglect-control and black-white variables. On affective support, the neglect mean was 4.25, the control 5.00, a difference significant beyond .0001 by ANOVA. On instrumental support, the respective means were 10.61 and 12.06, also significant beyond .0001.

This study shows, then, that although the neglectful household is typically not completely bereft of informal sources of support, on average the mothers find themselves limited in places to turn. Other women, similarly disadvantaged, have more sense of support. Despite the use of newly designed instruments and, of course, a markedly different setting for the research, the conclusions from rural Georgia closely parallelled those from a study done by the researchers in Philadelphia.

Other Social Contacts

Although little information was collected on this issue, it did seem that the smaller size of helping networks was accompanied by constriction in other contacts. The researchers asked about membership in the church because it is the prominent formal organization in the Georgia countryside. Actually, 87.5 percent of all black and 57.5 percent of all white women interviewed claimed church membership. The question was asked: "How often do you go to church services?" Rated high in attendance were those who said they went several times a month or more; rated low, those who attended several times a year or less. Fifty-five percent of the controls were frequent church participants, compared with 35.5 percent of the neglects ($p<.02$ by chi-square test). Controls affiliated more elsewhere, too. Twenty-four percent of them belonged to two clubs or more, other than the church; only 10.6 percent of the neglects had such associations.

One additional finding may also be taken as indicative of social constriction accompanying neglect. Asked what they would do to allay feeling lonely, 80 percent of the control mothers said they would call a friend. The proportion of the neglect mothers making this response was 60.5 percent, which, while a majority, was a significantly smaller part of the group ($p<.01$ by chi-square test).

TABLE 3

Proportions Saying Three or More People Will Help

	Percentages	
Services	Neglect	Control
1. Lend five dollars	22.4	55.0[a]
2. Lend food, clothing	23.7	45.0[b]
3. Comfort when feeling low	25.0	56.3[a]
4. Prepare food when sick, absent	26.3	51.3[b]
5. Give ride to store, doctor	30.3	45.0[c]
6. Rescue if in police trouble	19.7	45.0[a]
7. Listen to problems with sympathy	26.3	56.3[a]
8. Babysit for children free	21.9	33.8[d]

[a] $p < 0.001$ by chi-square test
[b] $p < 0.01$
[c] $p < 0.05$
[d] $p < 0.005$ for extremes

Supportiveness of the Neighborhood

As James A. Garbarino has indicated, it does seem likely that a fragile family may care adequately for its children, given a sufficiently supportive setting, but deteriorate in one that in nonsupportive.[20] Indeed, the roles of competent grandparents and willing friends may be overlooked - because they are taken for granted - in understanding how others manage to protect their children against life disasters. Wolock and Horowitz found their maltreating AFDC mothers more negative than a comparison group about two aspects of their neighborhoods - neighborliness and the calibre of available housing.[21] Garbarino's own data, however, were somewhat anomalous with respect to the role of the setting in child neglect. "Low neighborhood morale, as well as individual morale, may have something to do, then, with child, abuse; its status with respect to child neglect remains uncertain."[22]

A number of questions in the interview, therefore, had to do with the mothers' feelings about the quality of life in the neighborhoods in which they lived. And their opinions were validated, in turn, against the attitudes of their nearby neighbors, four-fifths of whom were "the women of the house."

A couple of key queries were adapted from the researchers' previous work as well as from that of Garbarino and Sherman.[23] The first was, "How friendly would you say people are around here?" Choices ranged on this five-point scale from "warm and friendly" (5) through "just about average" (3) to "cold and distant"(1). Means of both groups were near point 4, "mostly friendly." Both neglect and control mothers - and their neighbors - rated their communities similarly on this variable.

"How helpful are the people around here?" Choices, again, were on a five-point scale ranging from "very neighborly" (5) to "not helpful" (1). Mean ratings were close to "pretty neighborly," point 4 on the scale. On this variable, the neglect women rated their settings lower than did the controls, but not to a degree approaching statistical significance. Nor did the neighbors confirm a difference between the communities.

How much in touch with prevailing opinion about their communities were these women? Postulating that the neglect women would be less in touch, the researchers compared the correlation between the neglect women's ratings of helpfulness with their neighbors', and did the same for the control group. The correlation (r) in the neglect sample was .07, which did not significantly depart from zero. While the correlation in the control was also low (r=.24), it was significant at beyond .02.

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20. Garbarino and Sherman, "High Risk Neighborhoods."

21. Wolock and Horowitz, "Child Maltreatment."

22. Polansky et al., Damaged Parents.

23. Garbarino and Sherman, "High Risk Neighborhoods."

The Children of Neglect

Similar evidence of being relatively out of touch was found in interviews with the children. A couple of matters stand out. For example, the children were asked if they knew their teachers' names, and nearly all did. Could they name their principals? Of the control children, 93.3 percent could do so; of the neglect, 76.7 percent. This discrepancy was significant beyond .01 (chi-square = 8.0316).

Although they had attended school about the same length of time as had the controls, neglect children also seemed to have made fewers friends there. When asked, "Are there folks you met in school you get to play with?" the mean number of playmates mentioned by the neglects was 3.14; by the controls, 3.75 ($p = .036$ by ANOVA). From other evidence, the researchers know this was not a matter of being less productive of responses on interview. Children of neglect are also isolated.

Special Status of Neglectful Households

The neglect mothers reported greater loneliness, felt that help is less available to them through informal channels, and reported themselves as relatively inactive socially, at least in formal organizations. Their situations could be due to being rebuffed, or they might reflect long-standing character problems by which they push people away despite feeling lonely. The researchers' previous study has firmly established that character problems are implicated in neglect. In the present ecological context, what has been learned? What is the objective evidence of isolation?

Based on information from and about the neighbors, there were few variations between the settings in which the neglect and the control families were found. It was not that the researchers encountered no significant differences; there were many. But, they were associated with race rather than with being neglectful or not. Thus, the communities appeared similar in socioeconomic statuses of neighbors, average number of both children and adults in nearby households, stability of residence, and availability of instrumental and affective support. Various indicators of quality of life as a place to rear children were also similar, with one exception. Somewhat more control neighbors rated their settings high on availability of playmates for children (30.4 percent vs. 49.3 percent; $p<.02$). So it was difficult to see the control women's lives as the more supportive.

Another hypothesis about the peculiar position of neglect families needs consideration. Are they somewhat isolated in their neighborhoods because, even there, they are recognizably deviant? When asked, "Are there folks in the community that seem to you to need help in making things better for their children?" 64 percent of the neighbors of the neglect families said "yes," but so did 53 percent of the controls. We're not asking you to name names, but could you tell us whereabouts they live?" If the researchers' hypothesis was true, control study families should draw only an average-expectable number of mentions, but neglect families many more. Interviewers could not always be sure whether or not the study family was being singled out, but of the instances where they felt certain, twenty-six neglect families

were identified by neighbors as in need of help with rearing children, but only seven of the controls were picked. (Chi-square = 16.7753; $p<.001$).

"Are there folks around here who help you when you need help?" "Where do they live?" Again, there were some uncertain identifications. However, where the interviewers felt sure, only six neglect families were chosen by neighbors as potential helpers, compared with twenty-two of the controls (chi-square = 10.1623; $p<.005$). Next was the more pointed query, "Are there some it would not really pay to call on for help?" Of the neighbors of neglect families responding, 69.3 percent said "yes"; of the neighbors of the controls, 44.6 percent ($p<.005$ by chi-square test). So the areas lived in by the neglect families, do, in fact, seem to have more unhelpful folks. "Where do they live?" Of sixty-one codable replies in the neglect sample, eleven identified that family as not helpful; of seventy in the control, only four pointed to the study family (chi-square = 3.7308); $p = .06$). So, the neglect families, themselves, are part of the problem. Their position is that, although seen disproportionately in need of help, they are also seen, disproportionately, as unlikely candidates to reciprocate it. Failure in reciprocity leads to being dropped from networks.

Is Child Neglect Encouraged?

An hypothesis occasionally met is that at least some child neglect occurs because the families live in neighborhoods, or at least small enclaves, in which all concerned are maintaining very poor standards of child care. That this does occur, the authors have no doubt. The question is whether it happens frequently enough to be a plausible explanation for any substantial amount of child neglect.

The interviewing of neighbors gave researchers an opportunity to test the plausibility of this hypothesis. The neighbor was interviewed, using an instrument previously devised to study the tendency of average citizens in a community to distance themselves from neglectful families.[24] The respondent was read a description of a family that seemed to be regarded by average people as neglectful. Then, she or he was asked a series of questions seeking opinion about how much intimacy of contact the neighbors would permit with such a family - for example, work at the same trade, invite to join one's church, permit one's child to eat there, babysit for their children, ask that mother to babysit for one's own children. If the hypothesis about the acceptability of neglectful child care in the neighborhood were generally true, then the neighbor of the neglect family should express less tendency to distance than did the typical neighbor of the control family. On fifteen social distance indicators the authors measured for both the community and the individual's own attitudes and found only one significant difference.[25] More

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24. Norman A. Polansky and James M. Gaudin, Jr., "Social Distancing of the Neglectful Family," Social Service Review 57 (June 1983): 196-208.

25. Ibid.

of the control mothers said they would be willing to work next to a parent from the neglect household. In fact, the controls expressed more acceptance than the neglect neighbors. So the hypothesis that neglect represents the community mores was not supported.

Conclusions

In summary, the major hypotheses of the study were that relative isolation and loneliness contribute to child neglect. Therefore, the neglect and control families would be found to differ on three factors. It was learned that, on the average, neglect mothers reported themselves less embedded in informal helping networks than other poor rural women. They were generally less socially participative. That neglectful mothers tend also to be more lonely was also confirmed. There was evidence that the children of neglect are less socially involved at school than are other poor children. These patterns proved general across both racial samples. So the study supported the hypotheses that neglectful families are isolated and feel lonely and lacking in social support. But, why?

The data permitted testing a number of possible explanations. Neglectful families were not more mobile geographically than were their controls. Their relatives were actually somewhat more geographically accessible. So, if distance from kin were the deciding factor, they had at least as good a chance of being helped as the controls.

How about such ecological features as supportiveness of the social setting and its quality of life? In rating their neighborhoods for helpfulness and friendliness, the neglect mothers did not differ from controls. Independent interviews with near neighbors also affirmed that the people among whom the neglect families found themselves were no less supportive than in other poor neighborhoods. Neighbors also provided data on various other indicators of quality of life, ranging from socioeconomic status of neighbors to perceived availability of helping persons and to safety and stimulation of the setting for children. Neglectful families did not appear more disadvantaged than other similar families. Nor did neighbors' attitudes indicate that they found themselves in enclaves in which low calibre child care was viewed permissively.

The data suggested that, rather than facing a generally nonsupportive social ecology, neglectful families are more likely to be recognized as "in need of help in rearing children." But they are less likely than most to be considered people to whom one would turn for help. Since reciprocating favors plays so large a role in most networks, neglectful families were typically in an unfortunate position. Their feelings of aloneness, then, are not just subjective, for they are apt to be viewed as deviant and to be distanced by others. While their neighborhoods, in general, seemed no less supportive than those of others who were caring for their children adequately, their peculiar roles seemed likely to exacerbate - certainly not to compensate for - other deficits in their lives.

So their "ecology" does make a difference. Once isolated, the characterological loneliness of these mothers may be reinforced by their

currents life status. Like poverty, isolation may not "cause" child neglect, but, once true, it certainly does not help solve the problem.

The research began with the belief that the personalistic and ecological perspectives on neglect are complementary, in line with the psychosocial approach. However, the role of individual character structure remains very powerful even in this joint perspective. If the neglectful mothers, on the average, are and feel more isolated, but their settings do not differ from those of women who feel supported, what conclusions can be reached? How they behave as individuals also makes a difference. A neighborhood is unlikely to become supportive for persons who simply do not fit in. One suspects, for example, that a change in residence by the average neglectful family probably would not lead to more connectedness unless the new community were unusually accepting and even instrusively caring. Among average-expectable communities, they can only anticipate more of the same.

On the positive side, the researchers affirm that study of the control families has heightened their awareness of the extent to which the lives even of the very poor may be enriched and, to some extent, buffered by their mutually supportive networks. It would be valuable if more of the mothers implicated in neglect could be helped to change so as to be able to enter such sustaining friendships. The study makes even more salient the need for skilled and persistent social casework to offer the kind of growth-enhancing emotional learning by which such change may occur. Such clients need a kind of human contact rarely offered by ordinary neighbors or even family. There is a need for skills in bridging self-imposed isolation; there is a need to tolerate relationships that are essentially one-sided; there is a need for perspective large enough to protect their children, while understanding the parents' needs and behaviors. The study also reinforces the significance of group techniques, homemaker services, and volunteer programs by which these unfortunate parents may also be forwarded toward forming trusting and reciprocating relationships with others. For the evidence is that if society lets nature take its course, the downward spiral of their lives gains momentum.